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INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000320

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PARIS FOR WALLER; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/28/2017

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SUBJECT: EU DELIVERS LONG-AWAITED HUMAN RIGHTS DEMARCHE TO
SYRIAN REGIME

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, for reasons 1.4 b/d.

11. (C) Summary. After the eight months of refusals, the SARG allowed the EU troika to deliver its much-anticipated, confidential human rights demarche to an assistant minister

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at the Syrian MFA. The German Ambassador, who led the demarche, told Charge that the talks were a constructive step and speculated that the Syrians may have allowed the demarche to continue the positive momentum generated as a result of the visit of Javier Solana. End Summary.

12. (C) On March 28, the EU ambassador, Vassilis Bontosoglou, in conjunction with the French Ambassador, Michel Duclos, and German Ambassador, Workmar Wenzel, demarched Syrian Assistant Foreign Minister Ahmed Arnous for nearly 45 minutes on three separate but related human rights issues. The SARG had refused to allow the Europeans to deliver the demarche for nearly eight months. The German Ambassador speculated to the Charge that the SARG wanted to follow up on the good atmosphere generated after the March visit of EU Foreign Policy and Security Chief, Javier Solana.

13. (C) The German Ambassador told the Charge March 29 that he viewed the demarche as a constructive step. He said he had pressed to go ahead with the demarche and he believed that it had been wrong to delay making the demarche for such a long period. (Note. The Ambassador noted the last time the EU had raised human rights concerns had been April of 2006). He said that Arnous had opened the meeting by making clear that the SARG was willing to engage with the Europeans on human rights issues as long as the Europeans were willing to engage on "a range of political and economic issue." The German Ambassador contrasted this tone with previous Syrian statements that there could be no discussions on human rights until the European Association agreement was approved.

14. (C) On the substance of the meeting, the German Ambassador said that given the delay in making any approach, there had been such a long list of issues that there had been no real focus on any one issue. His goal had been to enter into a dialogue on all issues and he had raised political prisoners, torture (including pressing the SARG to accept a visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Convention on Torture), and Iranian Ahwazi asylum cases who were being detained and returned to Iran.

15. (C) The German Ambassador said that Arnous had engaged on every point but had expressed a lack of information on the

torture issues. On the Ahwazi cases, Arnous acknowledged there were issues but said that they had received "warrants from Interpol" on two of the cases. When the German pushed back, Arnous had stated that MFA International Organizations Director Basil Hamwi would be ready to address issues related to the Ahwazis. Arnous had also designated Hamwi to serve as the channel on torture issues. The German Ambassador said the meeting had established the basis for a dialogue but that the proof would be if there was any follow up from the MFA. He noted that Hamwi would be in Geneva most of April before transferring definitively in the summer as the Syrian lead representative to UN Agencies, but said he would see whether Hamwi's deputy, who has been named to replace Hamwi in the MFA, would continue to serve as a channel for discussion of these sensitive issues.

¶6. (C) In a separate meeting with emboffs on March 29, EU pol counselor, Loic Zeller, said that the European threesome asked Arnous questions regarding the ongoing political trials of four imprisoned dissidents: political reformer and activist Kamal Labwani, human rights lawyer and civil society activist Anwar al-Bunni, writer and intellectual Michel Kilo and Communist party activist Mahmoud Issa. According to Zeller, Arnous insisted that the matters were strictly a criminal affair and as such the government could not interfere with Syria's independent judiciary. A German Embassy officer commented to us that Arnous told the European trio that the law for the National Human Rights Commission is complete and the Commission will be ready after the national elections.

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